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‘A Game of Pain’: Youth Marginalisation and the Gangs of Freetown*

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ABSTRACT

Within two decades, Sierra Leone’s ‘cliques’ have transformed from peripheral social clubs to warring Crips, Bloods, and Black street gangs at the heart of criminal and political violence. Nevertheless, they remain severely under-studied, with scholarship on Sierra Leonean youth marginality heavily focused on ex-combatants. Drawing on extended fieldwork with Freetown’s cliques as they played the ‘game’ – the daily hustle to survive and resist the ‘system’ – this article offers two main contributions. First, it addresses the knowledge gap by charting the origins, evolution, and contemporary organisation of these new urban players. Second, it argues that although this history reveals continuity in perennial forms of youth marginalisation, it also shows that the game itself has changed. Cycles of escalating violence and growth are hardwired into this new game. Exacerbated by a political system that sustains and exploits them, cliques present a far greater challenge to everyday peace than has hitherto been recognised.

INTRODUCTION

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Hey boy, down here you do what the system forces you to do, if you really want to survive.

(Gaz D'Paper Poet 2020)

Those who created the system don't shake hands with us

They believe our hands are filthy

Even though they are the reason why we can't afford soap.

(Kamara 2019)

The marginalisation of Sierra Leone's youth is a central theme in an extensive literature exploring the causes, conduct, and consequences of the country's 1991-2002 civil war.

Peacebuilding scholarship and policy-making has been dominated by an emphasis on youth empowerment and the urgency of meeting the needs of ex-combatants, seen as necessary to avert another 'youth crisis' and avoid reproducing the conditions that gave rise to war (Enria 2018: 2; Mitton 2013: 322). It is then no small irony that this focus has left the growth of Sierra Leone's street gangs, comprised of a younger generation not involved in the war, largely overlooked.¹ As ex-combatants have aged and diminished as a perceived security threat, rising gang violence has put this neglect into stark relief. Known as 'cliques', within twenty years – a lifetime for many gang members – they have grown from a loose collection of teenage social groups to become a nationwide patchwork of 'teams' that have coalesced under the broad umbrella of three main gangs: Bloods, or Members of Blood (MOB)²; Crips, and So-So Black (hereafter Black). They have adopted and adapted US-inspired gang culture, with membership signified by wearing the red, blue, or black *muffler* (bandana). Each claims to govern defined territory and recounts a history of 'beefs' (conflict) with rivals. They have established hierarchies with 'soldiers' – the rank-and-file – led by a CO, followed by a Five Star General (or 5-0) who is often the *de facto* day-to-day leader.³ Feared for their involvement in robbery, they have also played a direct role in electoral violence and have

permeated Sierra Leone's schools and correctional centres. They have gone from being a fringe law and order issue of the police to a central concern of the Office of National Security (ONS int.).

What drove this rapid transformation, and what are its implications? There is surprisingly little existing research from which to draw answers. At the time of writing, only a few studies speak directly to the cliques. Among these, Abdullah's article (2020), based on an unpublished 2017 report, represents by far the most extensive. Observing the pronounced absence of relevant scholarship, Abdullah draws on interviews with gangsters in Bo, Freetown and Kenema to provide an invaluable overview and historical contextualisation of the 'game.' Other studies include Bangura's (2016) unpublished security brief for the ONS and De Bruijne's blog posts (2019a, 2019b) on clique organisation and interaction with political elites. Less directly, based on fieldwork up until 2009 and focused on ex-combatants, Utas provides valuable insights on the organisation of post-war militias 'as seen through the lens of U.S. gangs', highlighting continuities in street-youth organisation over time (Utas 2014: 186). Research on Sierra Leone's post-war music scene by Tucker (2013) and Lahai (2014) also offers useful detail on the interaction of hip-hop and rap with emergent gang culture. Taken together, these contributions represent the sum-total of scholarship to date on Sierra Leone's cliques; they inform this article throughout, but in their scarcity, demonstrate the need for further in-depth study.

Beyond Sierra Leone, this research complements recent work on marginal African urban youth that emphasises the importance of local context and the dangers of uncritically importing framings developed in very different (often North American) milieux (see Divon & Owore 2021: 83; Abdullah 2020: 42). Recognising the fluidity and diversity of actors in urban Africa, and that rigid terminology is inimical to context-sensitivity (Fraser and Hagedorn 2018), it defines gangs broadly as 'alienated groups socialized by the streets'

(Hagedorn 2008: 31). This brings out instructive contrasts between cliques and better documented cases. For example, similar to gangs in South Africa (Jensen 2008), Sierra Leone's cliques draw from US-inspired street culture, yet they are only in their first generation of development, their violence is comparatively lower in intensity, and there are no pronounced racial inequalities or a lucrative narcotics trade that may help explain their growth. As such, this study diversifies our understanding of the early development of street gangs in marginal urban African spaces and sheds light on the critical roles that alienation, insecurity, and status play in shaping them.

Using Freetown as a case study, this article draws primarily on 180 in-depth interviews conducted across the city in February-April 2018 with 'teams' *reppin* (representing) the three major gangs – Bloods, Crips and Black – as well loosely aligned cliques and other relevant actors, such as community members and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP).⁴ These unstructured individual and group discussions followed time hanging-out with gangs in their hoods and recreational spots. Cliques varied from small fluid groups of twenty or so teenagers to large teams of well over 200 hundred members led by those in their late twenties and early thirties. Many had female members but males comprised the substantial majority.⁵ Access to gangs was facilitated by existing street-contacts and the expert assistance of Mohammed S. Kamara, a youth worker and documentary filmmaker who grew-up on Freetown's streets.

Discussion is divided into three main sections. The first introduces Freetown's cliques as the new generation of urban rebels. It briefly summarises preceding youth sodalities before charting cliques' evolution from informal social clubs to street gangs. It details the emergence of competing clique identities and territories, exploring how authorities have responded and the role cliques have played in elections. The following section shows how cliques represent continuity as the latest expression of, and response to, longstanding forms of marginalisation

– the social, political, and economic exclusion of urban youth. Nevertheless, it corroborates Abdullah’s (2020) finding that cliques have developed in ways that are markedly distinct from their predecessors, going further by showing how these differences embody vicious cycles of escalating growth and violence that may further institutionalise Freetown’s gang scene and pose a significant threat to peace and security. Finally, the article concludes with brief reflection on potential solutions to this challenge, as proposed by gangsters themselves.

STREET GANGS IN SIERRA LEONE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Sierra Leone’s post-independence history has been shaped by a pronounced north-south political divide, broadly corresponding to a Temne-Mende ethnic divide and the two main parties (Kandeh 1992), yet associations of marginalised youth have often been markedly varied in composition.⁶ Contemporary cliques, like wartime rebels preceding them, emphasise this pluralism as an intentional challenge to the divisive practices of elites. Nevertheless, like their pre-war antecedents of the 1970s and 1980s, they are also vulnerable to politicisation by incorporation into patronage networks through which elites dictate access to resources and opportunities along political lines (Boersch-Supan 2013; Enria 2015).

Street-based associations of ‘marginals’ have been a perennial source of violent resistance against the ‘system’ – the structural inequalities that keep them poor and marginalised – as well as a source of violence *for* the system, regularly mobilised by political patrons to intimidate rivals. Due to this violence and their survival by illicit means, they have been stigmatised as lawless and idle in a way that obscures the complicity of elites and the reality that survival on the streets is relentless work, requiring endless resourcefulness. Street groups can be understood as performing three main functions for marginal youth; as an expression of resistance against their marginality; as a means of mitigating the daily insecurity of

marginality; and as a potential way out of marginality, for example by accessing patronage networks.

Nineteenth-century British colonial rule rendered many rural Sierra Leonean youths ‘neither citizen nor subject,’ forcing those without influential connections to seek a living in illicit economies and urban centres (Fanthorpe 2001: 372). This embedded a bifurcated social world – what Abdullah refers to as the ‘colonial duality’ – dividing the mainstream from the marginalised, the ‘respectable’ from the ‘dregs of society’ (Abdullah 2002: 21). Youths surviving on the streets became the feared archetypes of social deviance. They are described as ‘gangs’ in early twentieth-century reports on crime in Freetown’s seafront slums (Abdullah 2002: 22) and appear in Graham Greene’s (1948) ‘Heart of the Matter’ as dangerous ‘wharf rats’ armed with razors and broken bottles. This supposed dangerous potential of Freetown’s youth permeated colonial efforts to delegitimise radical social movements as support for decolonisation gathered momentum (Spitzer & Denzer 1973). Fear of the spread of Marxism combined with colonial notions that a politically engaged urban poor represented a threat to order and civilisation itself. Ensuring law and order thus became synonymous with maintaining the political marginalisation of urban youth.

Post-independence, *rarray boy* subculture, comprised of marginal youth engaged in petty crime, played a central role in the socio-spatial organisation of the street (Utas 2014: 173). Their social life revolved around the *potes* – hangouts where youth would drink, smoke, and gamble together – and the *odelays* – alternative secret societies for those excluded from mainstream societies and dancehalls due to class and ethnic divides (King 2016: 59). In this regard *rarray* subculture expressed resistance to an exclusionary system (Abdullah 2002: 23) and provided marginals a sense of belonging and security that was otherwise out of reach (Utas 2014: 174). Following independence in 1961, they were drawn into the power-struggle

between the two main political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC). Street youth were mobilised in a way that highlighted and compounded their marginalisation, sought for their violent labour rather than as a constituency and incorporated into youth wings that were 'always peripheral to where real power was located' (Abdullah 1998: 207). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they became a primary tool for both political suppression and resistance in what Rosen describes as the 'fusion of politics and street violence' (Rosen 2005: 78; Harris 2013: 69-70).

Economic recession in the late 1980s exposed the degree to which wealth was concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite, leaving Sierra Leone's youth desperate and politically frustrated (Bangura 1997: 134; Richards 1996). Emerging US rap culture became a fixture in informal social clubs across Freetown, resonating through its message of resistance to the system and the poverty of the ghetto. Student radicals increasingly socialised in the *potes*, drawn by shared opposition to the system (Harris 2013: 69-70), whilst rural youth unable to subsist on farming or alluvial mining sought a living in urban areas, some forming groups resembling street gangs (Peters 2011: 53). A 1989 study estimated Freetown was home to 10,000 street children, including gangs led by 'Bras' who provided younger members ('Greens' and 'Ballheads') with food and 'shelter from the outside world', acting as a 'self-chosen 'family'' (PEA 1989: 7). It articulated contemporary concerns over urbanisation: 'In the rapidly growing towns street life has its own rules and regulations. There is too little space, too little food, too little shelter needed to be shared by too many. The fight for daily survival imposes its regime: the stronger ones win, the feeble ones are crushed' (PEA 1989: 8).

Civil war arrived in 1991. Much has been written about the recruitment of marginalised youth into the ranks of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) – who vowed to destroy the 'rotten system' – and how their grievances and hopelessness fomented conflict and shaped its brutality (Mitton 2015; Richards 1996). For many, the war was a continuation of the 'game' –

the struggle within and against the system – and some combatants wore gangster attire and quoted Tupac Shakur (Utas 2014: 179; Nuxoll 2015; Presthold 2009). After war ended in 2002, peacebuilding efforts were dominated by fears of ex-combatant remobilisation; averting another ‘youth crisis’ became the ‘master narrative’ of policy (Fanthorpe & Machonchie 2010: 256; Boersch-Supan 2013: 25). Warnings that little had substantively changed for Sierra Leone’s youth took on fresh urgency during elections in 2007, when ex-combatant ‘taskforces’ mobilised by rival parties clashed violently (Christensen & Utas 2008). Many ex-combatants had sought these opportunities but became disillusioned by the ‘betrayal’ of politicians as their violent labour failed to bring promised returns (Enria 2015: 640). By the 2012 elections, some vowed they would leave the ‘game’ rather than risk being ‘used’ again; others found little demand for their violence and repackaged their services as the capacity to ‘silence violence’ for those willing to pay for peace (Utas & Christensen 2016; Mitton 2013). By 2018 elections, most ex-combatants had aged-out of what was considered a young man’s game. But strikingly, a new generation of marginal youth came to play a central role in the fusion of politics and street violence: the cliques.

Despite only recently receiving attention, the cliques have been present in Sierra Leone since the early 2000s. The following sections chart their historical evolution in Freetown over three phases: a formative phase (2000-2007); a coalescing phase (2008-2015); and an ongoing institutionalising phase (2016-2021).

Cliques: the new players in town (2000-2007)

Multiple independent cliques sprung up across Sierra Leone in the early 2000s. A common origin was the formation of post-war social clubs by school students and street youth. Freetown’s musicscape was experiencing a hip-hop renaissance (Lahai 2014: 212) and the

focus of the early cliques, as with their antecedents in the 1980s and 1990s, was recreational enjoyment of music, dance competitions, drink and marijuana. Throughout fieldwork, founding 'OG' members referred nostalgically to these years as an idealised time when the game was purely about 'bluffing' – showing off clothes and style – and had yet to be tainted by violence and reckless disregard for 'real' gangster values by newer members:

When the game started it was about bluffing. Have a bigger life. Get the money, go to the club, buy drinks, buy fine jeans, a fine crib. It changed because of jealousy. ... The violence started in 2006 and 2007. The killing was too much, between gangsters, colour to colour. Red against Black. Young guys attacked each other with cutlasses. ... The fighting was all about the colour.' (Bronx 105 CO, int.)

In the early years, cliques adapted the style of US gangs found in movies and rap music, making it their own through local artists and twists on names. Identities were fluid, with the nascent Crips including both black and blue colours. They freely mingled and attended each other's shows, though significant tensions already existed between youth of the east and west, reflecting historical divides that cast the east end as a poorer and more dangerous part of Freetown.

In 2007, with public attention fixed on ex-combatants during the first major post-war elections, clique violence increased. Until this point confrontations were predominantly interpersonal; altercations in nightclubs and fights over women. Clique membership was a rare source of pride and respect on the streets that many were willing to defend at all costs. Feuds were settled with broken bottles, knives, and machetes, often resulting in disfigurement, fatalities, and prison sentences. As cliques grew and began to cohere, individual pride became ever more corporate, associated with support for a specific team, colour and hood. Accordingly, inter-clique conflict in 2007 increasingly took on the dynamics of football rivalries, with opposing supporters fighting for the reputation of their

team. The link with football was often literal; cliques supporting rival teams clashed regularly when attending matches across the city (KKK Gangster A int.).

Killing for colour (2008-2015)

By 2008, Freetown's increasingly polarised cliques were coalescing around three overarching gang identities, resulting in a clear territorial dominance of Bloods in the west end (West Coast), Crips in the centre (or Cent Coast), and Black in the east end (or East Coast/Hood). The red-wearing MOB and blue- and black-wearing Cent Coast Crips (CCC) were the first to consolidate. According to founding members of the east end's So-So Black, their sense of insecurity was increased by the consolidation of Bloods, particular when travelling west to events at the national stadium, which fell within Blood-affiliated Black Street Family territory (KKK Gangster A int.). In response, in 2008 several east end cliques in Kossoh Town formed So-So Black (or simply Black), adopting the black *muffler* and formally creating the East Hood as a kind of federation for collective security.⁷ These developments added momentum to a cycle of insecurity by further polarising gang identities, increasing the risks of violence whenever Black gangsters ventured west *en masse*. Such confrontations were headline-grabbing, taking place in central and western Freetown where the elites and 'mainstream' lived (KKK Gangster B int.). For isolated cliques in areas dominated by rivals, simply travelling outside of their immediate territory risked attack. For marginal urban youth not yet affiliated to a gang, joining to seek protection became a logical step.

A second key development came through the music scene as emerging Sierra Leonean musicians engaged in well-publicised 'beefs.' Most prominent was that between self-declared 'King of Freetown' Kao Denero and his 'Black Leo' fanbase, and US diaspora-based LAJ, supported by the 'Red Flag Movement' (RFM). Their rivalry, perhaps intended to generate

publicity by mirroring US East vs. West Coast rap beefs, gained widespread attention in 2010 following their on-stage tussle for the microphone as Freetown played host to global star Akon. Subsequent clashes between fans were described as a ‘national security’ concern by local press and the first time music rivalries had ‘reached the level of gangs’ (Boima 2013: 17-18; Bah 2010). Though distinct from cliques, Black Leo and RFM did play upon the ‘black versus red’ animosity and, as Boima (2013: 13) notes, clique members began to use fan-rallies as opportunities to settle scores. This mimicked contemporaneous developments in Jamaica’s dancehall scene, where warring fans of Mavado and Vybz Kartel, split between the ‘Gully’ Kingston neighbourhood and an area of Portmore known as ‘Gaza,’ fought at concerts, schools, and prisons (Petridis 2010). In Freetown, where dancehall enjoyed great popularity, the assignments of Gully and Gaza began to intersect gang identities; cliques in lower seaside slums were Gully (signified by additional green colours), and those higher-up were Gaza (signified by yellow) (Give-a-damn Gaza 5-0 int.).⁸

Ahead of 2012 elections senior politicians attempted gang mediation, ostensibly as part of a ‘Say No to Violence’ campaign. President Koroma brought LAJ and Kao Denero together to end their public feud (Boima 2013: 53), while several ministers brought rival clique leaders together to agree peace. However, in an often-repeated phrase, gang members explained ‘the peace was not real’ as agreements failed to address long-standing vendettas: ‘The peace is always temporary. It won’t last. Within a month, shit will happen. They [gangsters] always remember what happened. They will always look for revenge. “You killed my brother, so I will kill you” – that’s why the fighting always continues’ (So-So Pink CO int.). This caused the rift between Crips and Black during failed peace efforts led by Musa Tarawally, then Minister of Internal Affairs: ‘They brought everyone together to make peace. But the Black decided to beat a man up from the Red. So then there was beef between the Red and Blue against the Black. There are so many Black who said ‘the MOB killed our guys, too many, so

we want revenge’ (CCC 5-0 int.). The Blood CO subject to this attack: ‘The Black called their guys and they started beating me, hitting me with bottles, throwing stones. They scarred my face. There was no peace. Blue had peace with us, but the Black didn’t want peace’ (Bronx 105 CO, int.).

For Black members, their rejection of politician’s overtures was also due to frustration that they offered no long-term solutions to marginality: ‘Anytime they go to President Ernest Koroma and they say “help me get rid of these boys that are causing trouble,” they give out some money. But we don’t receive it, so we fight again. It causes more trouble. We need jobs, not money’ (KKK Gangster C int.). Rather than being ‘real’, it was widely believed the peace deals were an attempt to politically co-opt street-youth during campaigning (Boima 2013: 53-54). This was a factor that became conspicuous in the lead-up to the 2018 elections.

Playing politics (2016-2021)

As Sierra Leone’s 2014 Ebola crisis receded, clique violence in the form of turf-wars and night-time robberies returned to the front pages. In 2016, Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Joseph Fitzgerald Kamara, publicly branded clique activity ‘domestic terrorism’, lamenting that ‘it appears as if every two weeks somebody is murdered in Freetown’ (*Awoko* 2016). Minister of Internal Affairs, Rtd Major Alfred Palo Conteh, made headlines the following year by endorsing the death penalty for ‘current inhuman acts by these lawless gangs’ (*Awoko* 2017). Under pressure to address rising clique violence and ensure peaceful elections, the police adopted a zero-tolerance approach in step with the hard-line rhetoric of ministers, arresting gang members for minor offences such as loitering and offering rewards for information leading to the arrest of leaders (Bangura 2016: 25; *PoliticoSL* 2016).

If this was the stick, a carrot was offered in further payments to ‘silence violence’, continuing the practice identified by Utas and Christensen (2016) during 2012 elections. Sheik, a ‘Street Ambassador’ who had positioned himself as the key intermediary between gangs and the government, regularly distributed money to COs at a central police station, reportedly on the President’s behalf. Widely understood as an attempt to shore-up political support from the streets, gangsters were happy to take the cash and, for the duration of campaigning, leave aside their beefs. In the run-up, cliques were approached by various candidates with offers of cash, food and drink in exchange for support (see also De Bruijne 2019b). A senior police officer recounted detaining busloads of gangsters about to embark for a provincial capital to engage in ‘election business’, much to the consternation of their political sponsors (SLP officer B int.). This mobilisation came under the spotlight in January 2018 when gangsters fought in the centre of Freetown during an APC rally, leading to a fatal stabbing. According to those involved, Bloods had accused Sheik of withholding cash⁹ received from the President to disburse among the gangs. The dispute turned violent and Sheik took refuge in his office, where Black gangsters found machetes and turned them on the Bloods. Fifty-five clique members were arrested, alongside Sheik. A gang leader opined that Sheik’s arrest was political theatre and his paymasters would ensure his release: ‘For now they will jail him, use him to blame him, but they will let him out again’ (Bronx 105 CO, int.). Shortly after, Sheik’s bail of Le1000,000 (roughly \$130USD) was paid (*Sierra Express* 2018). An informant inside the criminal justice system claimed the money came from the ruling party; another of those bailed, a close friend of the individual killed, believed it came directly from the President (Give-a-damn Gaza Gangster A int.). A police officer commented: ‘There is no punishment for violence if you have protection from a politician’ (SLP officer B int.).

Following the ballot, gangsters involved in election business displayed frustration with politicians and the ‘system’, closely echoing sentiments expressed by previous generations of

ex-combatants who gained little from the politics game. For those who backed the losing side, such as an MOB Four-Star General who – to the amusement of his peers – had tattooed APC initials on to his arms, the elections were a chastening experience. However, most gangsters had not pinned hopes on the outcome delivering jobs or powerful connections, opting instead to exploit opportunities for immediate tangible returns, such as cash.

By 2021, cliques had reached an advanced stage of institutionalisation – the process of becoming embedded major players in the life of their communities (Hagedorn 2008: 10). This was exemplified by their claimed roles as ‘governors.’ Although initially resistant, many communities had come to an accommodation with cliques as they had grown, recognising that clique leaders could help control younger members and provide protection from outside gangs (Community nurse int.). One CO explained: ‘At first our community didn’t trust us, they were afraid of us. But now we are powerful and the community asks us to provide security to them’ (MOB CO A int.). Another CO of a large MOB hood claimed to have struck a deal with local police; he kept his members and local youth in line, preventing theft and fighting in the area, and in return police looked the other way as he ran his *jamba* (marijuana) business (Bronx 105 CO int.). This development underlined just how far the cliques had evolved; no longer peripheral social clubs, they had played a role in national politics and were now shaping the local contours of order and (in)security in their communities.

NEW PLAYERS, OLD GAME?

If Freetown’s cliques are the new players on the streets, then in many respects the game they are playing is an old one. Just as *rarray boys* looked to the *odelays* and ex-combatants drew on their wartime networks, gangsters have used the cliques as a means to survive, if not

escape, everyday insecurity. Like their predecessors, their members are drawn primarily from the poorest urban youth, who find in the cliques protection, a sense of belonging, and a way to become ‘somebody’ (Abdullah 2017: 5). Just like *rarray boys*, students and youth from privileged families are also drawn to the cliques, but unlike their poorer peers, they tend to avoid the riskier aspects of street-life: ‘They like to pose. They will buy things for us, but they’ll never go and fight like us. They join so that people are afraid of them. So that people won’t try to take their money. It keeps them safe’ (KKK CO int.).¹⁰

The cliques have been forged by the same context of insecurity that spawned *rarray boys*, that fuelled RUF recruitment, and that was a continued source of frustration among ex-combatants in the early post-war years. They are likewise an expression of resistance and protest against the system. As such, the adaption of US gang culture should not be mistaken as an importation of foreign violence or street culture.¹¹ Rap lyrics from US cities speak to young people in Freetown due to common points of reference around violence and everyday insecurity (Utas 2014: 182-82), but Freetown’s gang scene, and the conditions it reflects, is fundamentally local (Abdullah 2017: 9). As a Black gangster explained: ‘We looked at the movies in America. We copied from there. But now the thing that we have is ours’ (KKK Gangster A int.).

During fieldwork, gang members were engaged in a range of licit and illicit activities. In the west an isolated but large group of Black gangsters practised *enter shack* (stealing from unlocked homes) and *bulldozing* – where those in land disputes pay gangsters to occupy land, intimidate tenants, and destroy structures (Give-a-damn Gaza CO int.). Near the national stadium Black Street Family (Blood) gangsters were casual labourers and operated a car wash. Further east, an MOB CO was a *jamba* dealer with a trade spanning the entire Western Area. In the east end, members of KKK (Black) made money from manual labour and seeking donations from passing *podas podas* (minibus taxis), officially voluntary but close to a

form of taxation. They disdained a nearby Blood clique's night-time *cranking* (robbery) of *kekes* (motorised tricycle taxis). This latter group also operated a protection racket in their community; local fishermen paid them to protect their stores, understanding to do otherwise would be risky (MOB CO A int.). All of these were subsistence activities and far from lucrative. As Utas (2014:183) notes, Freetown's urban economy is not "'fists full of gold" but bare survival', and gangsters understand their violence as a consequence, not a cause, of insecurity: 'The violence is because anywhere there is an angry man, there is a hungry man. If we don't have skills how do you think we will get money?' (KKK 5-0 int.). For some older members, crime had become their only means of supporting families. While many gangsters explicitly distanced themselves from robbery, those involved justified it as a last resort forced by the lack of legal alternatives: 'If I had a job I would focus on that, but there are no jobs for the youths. So whenever we see someone walking with money, we have to do what we need to do' (MOB Gangster A int.).

Given their similar profiles and activities, it is unsurprising cliques are often conflated with *rarray boys* and ex-combatants. However, while the conditions that produced street gangs suggest continuity in the marginalisation of urban youth, this latest expression of that marginalisation represents significant change. Cliques are not extensions of, nor significantly interconnected with, ex-combatant networks. There are few ex-combatant members among their number, with most too young to recall the war. An OG explained: 'There were no ex-combatants involved with us when we started. It was [school] students. Gangsters and ex-combatants didn't mix' (Bronx 105 CO int.). When it comes to *rarray* culture, the comparison is considered an insult. A Crips CO explained: 'It's the *rarray boys* who like to steal and thieve. But we are *reppin* the real game. We are the real gangsters' (CCC CO int.). This statement illustrates a widely shared understanding of unwritten rules of the game; to be

an authentic gangster not only requires formal initiation into a clique, but also demonstration of fearlessness, loyalty to the colour (or ‘flag’), and love for the hood. To cliques, *rarray boys* are aimless and individualistic, preying on their own neighbourhoods. By contrast, cliques consider themselves protectors of their communities; those involved in theft and robbery frame these actions as necessities of survival and typically only target outside communities.

Several attributes further distinguish Freetown’s cliques: they contest physical territories in defined hoods; they have defined colour-signifiers of gang membership, whereby wearing the wrong colour in a neighbourhood can get you killed; and they have formalised hierarchies of command and membership processes. As Abdullah notes, such rigid, militaristic hierarchy is ‘unthinkable’ in *rarray* culture (Abdullah 2017: 23). These differences suggest cliques are not only new players; they are playing with new rules. In their words, ‘the game has changed.’ The following section argues that escalating cycles of insecurity are hardwired into the rules of this new game, giving it internal momentum that has perpetuated cliques’ rapid evolution and suggesting that, if continuing on their current trajectory, cliques could pose an altogether more serious challenge.

THE VICIOUS CYCLES OF THE ‘GAME OF PAIN’

In the absence of a lucrative narcotics market, seen as intensifying criminal turf-wars in cities around the world, the polarising dynamics of intergang rivalry are a primary driver of clique-violence in Freetown.¹² One gangster observed: ‘Money is not everything. For us here love is everything’ (KKK Gangster B int.). In the early years, this love took the form of socialising in an environment which generally brought marginal youths together in shared appreciation of music and street culture. However, as different cliques cohered and rivalries between Bloods and Black, and between east and west Freetown, became more pronounced, that love

was increasingly invested in a particular colour and hood, whereby loyalty to one meant animosity to another. This polarisation hardwired violent beefing into the game, with clique members viewing themselves as soldiers in a street war. As intergang violence tends to provoke reprisals, this created a vicious cycle that has changed the game:

Now the game is a fight. You can go to a hood and the small boys, the young ones, they don't even know where the gang came from. They don't know the history. They are the first to harm you. It's a beef game for the young ones. They don't know what 'gangster' means. All they know about is the fight. It's a game of pain. If you die, you die (Bronx 105 CO int.).

A second cycle has developed from the way social status and gang promotions are tied to demonstrations of loyalty, fearlessness, and strength. Enria (2015: 639) shows how marginal Freetown youth use 'love' to denote relations of reciprocity, particularly those sought with political 'big men' to whom their violence signals loyalty. Within cliques, beefing with rivals likewise acts as a signal to peers, demonstrating love, loyalty, fearlessness, and strength. It is a primary way for gangsters to accumulate what can be termed 'street capital' (Sandberg 2008: 161): 'When you get mind to go and beef, that's how you get promoted. When you get mind to fight you have to hurt somebody, you can't let anyone resist you. That's when you are the leader. And you must have fame, a reputation' (KKK Gangster C int.). To make it to the top typically requires serving prison-time; it was widely claimed by members that to make 5-0 and CO required stabbing rivals, even killing. These qualifications are inked on the bodies of office holders; a 5-0 proudly explained his tattoo of twenty teardrops: 'Each tear is for killing someone or for stabbing them' (Stay Black 5-0 int.). This means of acquiring street capital provides incentives for those at the bottom of the ladder, the youngest and newest members, to commit violence that is often at odds with the wishes of elders.

Where poverty and marginalisation are felt as acute daily humiliations, gangs offer members a route to status and self-esteem that otherwise seem inaccessible. Similar to how wartime

groups became conduits of individual shame and pride (Keen 2005; Mitton 2015), gangsters' self-esteem and status are tied to the collective pride of the clique, which must be defended above all else. Accordingly, intergang violence is less about markets or territory than about tit-for-tat defending of honour of the self or group: 'We're fighting just for the colour. Everybody has his own team. I'll do it for my flag. It's an oath. There is no other reason, not for money, not for women' (MOB Gangster A int.).

Polarisation has manifest in the territoriality of gangs; cliques have made Freetown spaces 'no go zones' to their rivals (Abdullah 2020: 48). Those entering enemy territory risk their lives, as do civilians inadvertently wearing gang colours. This insecurity feeds clique recruitment in a third vicious cycle: the more gangs grow, the greater the incentives for young people to join for protection. A senior MOB gangster recounted being a 'nice Krio schoolboy' attacked by Black gangsters for wearing red in the East Hood; he subsequently joined the Bloods seeking protection and revenge (MOB Gangster B int.). Ironically, he then experienced greater insecurity across Freetown. Gangsters feel unable to traverse the city safely unless in large numbers: 'I want to go to the west end peacefully. I want to go to Lumley Beach. But if I go, a west end boy sees me – an east end boy – they are going to stab me. ... The boys in Black cannot go anywhere in the west end' (KKK Gangster A int.). For those who try leaving the gang, shaking their association proves difficult:

The other gangs will never believe that you left the gang. Because when you're a gangster you're a gangster for life. If you go somewhere they know you – you are Black and they are an enemy – they will harm you. If you are famous, even though you say you're not a gangster they will know you. They will look at your tattoo – '104' – they will see that tattoo and go for you properly (KKK 5-0 int.).

The growth of Freetown's gangs has severely limited the mobility of many urban youth, leaving members feeling trapped while creating strong incentives for non-members to join.

Incentives are strongest for the most vulnerable in communities, as illustrated by a group of more than twenty homeless teenage girls in Susan's Bay. Most had arrived from provincial towns and villages, fleeing abusive or broken domestic relationships, and were engaged in prostitution to survive. They decided to join the local Bloods to prevent daily harassment by that gang. This strategy had worked, but they were now being violently targeted by rival Black gangsters (MOB female members int.).

These cycles have been exacerbated by policing and criminal justice responses. The more cliques are targeted by zero-tolerance policing, the more they consolidate and grow. Rather than deterring gangsters from gang life, arrests and incarceration boost their street capital and chances of promotion. Furthermore, incarceration acts as an accelerant of gang growth.

Interviews with clique members in correctional centres underlined how prisons act as gang incubators and networking hubs. Inmates reported that prisoners were increasingly segregated by gang allegiances (Give-a-damn Gaza CO int.; MOB CO B int.). As in many cities around the world (Lessing 2017), young people entering prisons for a range of offences were liable to join a gang.¹³ Some sought physical security during their time inside; for others, joining gave access to new networks that could prove advantageous when returning to the streets.

Bringing together gangsters from across Sierra Leone, thanks to inter-regional transfers due to overcrowding, prisons also helped spread cliques nationwide (Black Gangster A int.).

To date only low-levels of clique violence affect Sierra Leone's prisons, but street-rivalries do play out in prison yards. In January 2020, Yayo – a Black OG – was moved blocks within Pademba Road prison after fighting with Skull, an MOB rival with whom he had a long-standing beef (Skull int.; Yayo int.). A more severe incident occurred in April 2020, when Pademba made international headlines as at least thirty prisoners and one correctional officer were killed in what was officially labelled a riot (SLCS 08.07.2020). Rumours connected

events to the presence of Palo Conteh, the former Minister of Internal Affairs who once declared war on cliques and was now awaiting trial in Pademba on treason and gun-possession charges. In videos widely circulated on social media, soldiers and prison officers interrogated Skull and Emperor, a Blood gangster, over their alleged involvement. Shown tied-up and bloodied, Emperor died from his injuries weeks later. An official briefing claimed ‘rival prison gangs clashed, attacking one another’ and this ‘may have caused the number of casualties to rise’ in a prison built for 324 inmates but housing well over 1300 (*The Sierra Leone Telegraph* 08.07.2020). Given the deployment of soldiers using live rounds and the politicised nature of this incident, these findings are contested. For gangsters they are an attempt by elites to scapegoat cliques. Nevertheless, the incident underscores that cliques have become dominant in prison life.

Cliques have also rapidly spread in schools. On the streets of Freetown, gang graffiti that is meaningless to older generations is instantly understood by schoolchildren, among whom Sierra Leonean rap is popular. A police officer remarked: ‘They can sing all the local rap songs, but not a single verse of the national anthem’ (SLP officer B int.). But the influence is more direct; cliques have established younger teams of schoolchildren who can graduate to full gang membership based on good ‘performance’ (Abdullah 2020: 41). This presents an extra challenge for parents seeking to keep their children away from cliques, particularly as joining these teams makes some students feel safer (SLP officer B int.). This trend suggests the new game in town has potential to increasingly draw in younger members, connecting them to incentives for violence as they seek membership and promotion, and rendering schools hubs of gang recruitment.

Finally, Sierra Leone’s political system is a catalyst for gang growth and institutionalisation. It has demonstrated its capacity to fuse street violence with party politics, imbuing electoral

violence (and non-violence) with socio-economic value whilst simultaneously deepening cliques' sense of marginalisation. As gangsters sought profit from 'election business' they also became frustrated about being used, receiving short-term payments rather than long-term assistance in the form of jobs and education. Emperor recalled being paid to cause trouble in 2007 elections, complaining: 'The honourables used us. Give us money, we will waste it. But give us jobs and we can change' (Emperor int.). The story was much the same in 2018, with frustrations compounded by the perceived duplicity of politicians publicly condemning cliques for violence they had privately sponsored. One gangster stated: 'We are suffering here, but they use and dump us. They abuse us and accuse us' (KKK Gangster C int.). Another added: 'During the elections people will come to us. But after the elections they don't even want to know about us. They say that we're smoking weed, that we're useless and senseless. That's the philosophy of the politicians' (KKK Gangster B int.).

Where cliques have departed from the experiences of ex-combatants is in seeking immediate payment from political sponsors rather than investing hope in promises of future employment. As De Bruijne (2019a) argues, this contrasts with ex-combatants who typically built-up 'debt' of long-term service that was rarely paid by their patrons (see Utas & Christensen 2016; Enria 2015). This may reflect the broad reluctance of elites to build closer relationships with gangs, limiting cliques' access to patronage networks and debt-building opportunities.¹⁴ During both 2012 and 2018 elections, pressure on parties to 'say no to violence' made such public associations politically costly. For cliques, it also reflects their determination not to be used and a more realistic understanding of what could be obtained from politicians, even if jobs were preferable. As his members made placards for a rally in 2018, a Blood CO in Moa Wharf, East Freetown, said: 'The APC paid us in small money and this rum to go rally, to go and cause trouble. After the election we won't get anything. This money won't last long, but a job would last' (MOB CO A int.).

Despite involvement in elections, cliques generally considered themselves politically unaligned, with many claiming the nature of this new game, in which loyalty to the gang is paramount, precludes their deeper politicisation. Indeed, though it is commonly assumed gang colours align with party support (such as Bloods supporting the red APC), there was no such straightforward relationship in 2018. Receiving payment from a political patron rarely bore relation to the sympathies of gangsters, and members of the same clique often professed support for rival candidates without fear of censorship or reprisal. Demonstrating agency and resistance to the ‘system’, gangsters seized opportunities for immediate gains of cash and goods but frequently subverted the process. Many took payments from both sides, and in a twist on ‘watermelon politics’ (Utas 2007), wore their gang colours – their true loyalty – under the shirts they were paid to wear (MOB Gangster C int.).

Whether cliques will continue to sell their violent labour to patrons, but not their long-term allegiance, remains unclear. Their rapid growth and nationwide membership of thousands makes them significant players on the street that political parties may be unwilling or unable to ignore. Based on their current trajectory, cliques may accumulate political capital as self-proclaimed ‘governors’ of their hoods, rather than just as muscle-for-hire. While claims of governorship are often overstated and vary across neighbourhoods, such an eventuality raises the prospect that patrons may seek to co-opt cliques to sway voters in their communities.

Gang leaders may look to leverage this influence to secure greater concessions than immediate pecuniary rewards, unable to pass on such opportunities amidst the daily struggle to survive. Such politicisation would surely intensify intergang rivalries, injecting them with the zero-sum logic of political party competition.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: CHANGING THE GAME

This article has argued that conditions that shaped Freetown's youth gangs of the past – poverty, exclusion, and insecurity – are the same driving youth into cliques today, yet the 'game of pain' they play is significantly different. The logics of intergang rivalry, territoriality, and social hierarchies have created escalating cycles of violent growth surpassing those of *rarray boys* and ex-combatants. These cycles are accelerated by their interaction with the criminal justice system, schools, and the political system, placing cliques on a trajectory towards deeper institutionalisation. Recognising this challenge is the first step towards addressing it. Consideration of next steps is the focus of ongoing collaborative work,¹⁵ but several key points can be made here.

First, clique leaders themselves possess the knowledge and authority to help 'change the game;' they are also among the most determined to end vicious cycles of gang-related insecurity.¹⁶ Like their predecessors, clique members seek ways out of marginality; the oldest among this first generation have an eye on the next: 'We don't want our children to join gangs. I know that no good comes from being in this gang. I always tell them that it's dangerous. I tell them "Don't follow me!"' (MOB Gangster A int.). A CO commented: 'We are the ones who need to stop this, because the younger ones who are coming up are doing the same thing' (KKK CO int.). Nevertheless, he lamented that so long as the conditions that led him to gang-life remained in place, appeals to the next generation would have little effect. This strikes at the heart of the challenge: Sierra Leone no more has a 'gang problem' than it ever had a 'youth problem.' The problem, in the parlance of gangsters, is the 'system.'

The system represents the social, economic, and political structures that have maintained an inequitable status quo and marginalised Freetown's youth for decades. As such, responses to cliques should not focus exclusively on them or their communities, but on these wider

conditions. In this regard, piecemeal cash donations and short-term programmes are inadequate: ‘They [the government] don’t provide us with options for us and our family, to help us find a way out, so that we don’t have to become gangsters. If you give us 100 million [Leones], it does not solve our problems. Give us one million dollars and it will not solve the problem’ (KKK Gangster B int.). Another commented: ‘This flag we are fighting for would make no sense if there are jobs. Of all the problems, the only problem that that has created this flag is joblessness’ (KKK CO. int.). East Hood gangsters cited a timber yard on the outskirts of Freetown that employed Bloods, Crips and Black-affiliated youths as an example of how gangsters quickly put aside ‘beefs’ given opportunity to earn. A 5-0 in the west of Freetown made a similar argument: ‘We need some big employment. Some factories. If we had that there wouldn’t be no trouble, no drama, and no clique’ (Give-a-damn Gaza 5-0 int.).

Clearly, poverty and unemployment alone cannot explain the growth of cliques and their violence; the majority of young Sierra Leoneans contend with these conditions but do not join gangs. Yet this article has shown that such conditions deepen incentives to join gangs for the most marginalised – those on the fringes of poor communities who lack social status, education, or a roof over their heads, and who find in cliques a sense of family, security, and respect.

The economic transformation gang members seek, as ex-combatants discovered after the war, may be an unrealistic prospect in the short-term. Nevertheless, their eagerness to find a ‘way out’ denotes a constructive energy that can be directed towards reforming gangs as pro-social organisations, an approach that has precedence in other contexts (see Brotherton & Gude 2020; Brotherton & Barrios 2004; Hagedorn 2017). Some have already undertaken initiatives. During the Covid-19 outbreak, cliques in the East Hood organised a local awareness-raising programme, handing out masks to residents and disseminating information

on sanitation precautions. Whilst this could be interpreted as an attempt to deepen the local legitimacy of the gang, the CO framed it as an attempt to demonstrate the productive potential of the clique to both residents and gangsters themselves. This potential is recognised in an internal report by the SLP's Freetown East Region, which recommends assisting gangs in transitioning to 'Community Development Associations' (SLP 2020). Such efforts must contend with the vulnerability of youth associations to co-option by patronage networks (Boersch-Supan 2013; Datzberger 2015) and avoid reproducing the very marginalising dynamics that created gangs. This points towards the need for change in a political system that has tended to exploit cliques rather than offer viable routes for their transformation. Practical steps in many other areas that could ameliorate cycles of clique violence – such as policing and criminal justice reforms – cannot succeed without political will to not only enact them, but to ensure politics does not subsequently undermine them. It is clique members themselves who argue that a truly inclusive system, which offers marginal youths equal opportunities for education and employment without political conditions, would remove the *raison d'être* of the 'game of pain.'

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NOTES

¹ Verweijen (2019) observes a similar neglect of gangs and urban violence by international analysts and practitioners in the DRC due to an exclusionary focus on conflict actors.

² Alternatively referred to as 'Money Over Bitches.'

³ Other typical ranks include Four Star General, Three Star General, and Beef Kings (responsible for leading the fight on the streets). There is significant variation across teams; other positions include Godfather, Chair, and Secretary.

⁴ Informant names have been anonymised. I also draw upon 320 nationwide interviews conducted during a 2018–21 British Academy study with Ibrahim Abdullah exploring cliques nationally and comparatively.

⁵ Female gangsters are the focus of current research.

⁶ In keeping with the national pattern, religious differences are not a source of division in cliques.

⁷ Abdullah (2017: 16) notes this was also intended to quell inter-Black clique conflict.

⁸ De Bruijne (2019a) notes this carries class-connotations, contrasting perceived relative privilege of upper versus lower-positioned communities.

⁹ Reportedly US\$7,800 (SLP officer C int.).

¹⁰ A senior police official recounted being pressured to release a government minister's son who had been arrested for gangsterism (SLP officer D int.).

¹¹ Defined as 'values, dispositions, practices and styles' that shape everyday life amongst sections of the urban poor, Ilan (2015: 8-9) notes street culture has both 'specific historic roots' and shares global characteristics 'born out of the more ubiquitous effects of exclusion.'

¹² A small cocaine market exists, served by *Kartels* (independent merchants), but gangsters deem it high-risk and unprofitable compared to selling cheap drugs affordable to street youths (Give-a-damn Gaza CO int.).

¹³ Similar dynamics were observed during my fieldwork with gangs in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro in 2017-2018.

¹⁴ The SLPP appeared disinclined to mobilise gangs, relying more on ex-military networks and a ‘Soja Squad’ sporting green *mufflers*.

¹⁵ Forthcoming with Ibrahim Abdullah.

¹⁶ For example, former gang leader Gazbee founded an organisation to help gangsters having transformed his own life through creative writing (Inveen 2020).